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Empathy levels and academic achievement of foreign language learners

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Abstract

Students' empathy levels and their achievement in foreign language learning were correlated in this study. Mehrabian and Epstein's (1972) measure of empathy was used to measure students' levels of empathy. The means of sixty-seven university level preparatory school students' three mid-term exams, six grammar quizzes, three writing portfolios and two oral exams were accepted as their achievement scores and were then compared to see whether or not there appeared significant correlation between students' achievement in foreign language learning and their empathy levels. The results showed no significant correlation between students' empathy levels and their achievement in foreign language learning.

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1. Introduction

Hogan (1969) describes empathy as "apprehension of another's condition or state of mind without actually experiencing that person's feelings" (p. 308). Similarly, Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) articulate that empathy is "the heightened responsiveness to another's emotional experience" (p. 526). In line with the pedagogical implications of increasing students' motivation and positive feeling in their classrooms (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998), for the purposes of this paper, empathy is accepted as contributing to foreign language learners' achievement (Wang, 2005). Hence, students' empathy levels appear to be of utmost importance in relation to their achievement.

Linguistic and communicative performance of non-native speakers was once accepted to be inherently limited as previously shown by Medgyes (1992) although achievement in language learning depends partly on the existence of high quality interaction and communication shared in the learning atmosphere. In that sense, students' needs, expectations and empathy level are essential in establishing a positive learning atmosphere (Wang, 2005; Cherniss, 2000). This task becomes more important when we consider the role of empathy in promoting positive rather than aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991).

It goes without saying that people tend to learn in a more robust manner when they feel good about themselves. Such a positive feeling involves understanding one's own weaknesses and strengths. From a theoretical standpoint, as Feshbach and Feshbach (1987) argue, it is possible to suggest a number of possible effects of affect-related

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dispositions and behaviors of learners on their own academic achievement (p. 1335). Similarly, the importance of learners' psychological states of mind has been underlined in many methods and approaches in foreign language learning among which the humanistic approach is the leading one. As such, empathy is necessary in order to feel good about ourselves because our negative feelings impede achieving our goals in the classroom environment (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). As shown by Feshbach and Feshbach (1987), affective factors are closely linked to children's cognitive development especially in girls' development in reading and spelling.

Many research studies are needed to understand the relationship between students' levels of empathy and their achievement in foreign language learning. Hence, the basic aim of this study was to find the correlation between students' empathy levels and their achievement in foreign language learning. To be more exact, this study tried to answer if there was a correlation between university level preparatory school English language learners' empathy levels and their achievement in foreign language learning.

2. Methodology

The Emotional Empathy Levels Scale (EETS), originally developed by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972), was used with major revisions for the purposes of this study. Originally, the scale consisted of 33 items, but in this study, the number of scale items was reduced to 20 for practical purposes. The scale was filled by students studying at Gaziantep University's Higher School of Foreign Languages. The results of this procedure were accepted as students' empathy levels. The means of students' three mid-term exams, six grammar and language use quizzes, three writing portfolios and two oral exams were counted as their achievement.

A pilot study with 52 students was conducted to check the reliability of the scale in this context and the Split-half reliability was found to be .72, suggesting that the scale was moderately reliable. In order to investigate whether there would be any significant correlation between students' empathy levels and their achievement in foreign language learning, Pearson's correlation test (r-test) was used. In this study, as in many other similar studies, Pearson's r-test result was expected to be over .30 in order to show that there existed correlation.

3. Findings

Table 1 illustrates each student's academic achievement (A), followed by their empathy levels (E). As these results show, students who have higher academic achievement scores may have lower empathy levels while the opposite is also possible.

Table 1. Students' academic achievement (A) and their empathy levels (E)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
A	72	70	72	64	65	70	62	64	66	69	81	63	62	60
E	63	70	58	71	69	69	68	86	62	71	61	87	71	68
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
A	65	60	57	66	58	67	66	78	61	69	58	63	70	87
E	58	60	52	68	71	69	56	61	63	73	76	73	69	77
	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42
A	76	56	50	70	65	67	67	68	52	73	80	53	80	67
E	72	67	63	80	70	74	70	51	77	73	75	62	79	67
	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56
A	74	68	63	71	48	42	82	75	61	65	62	58	83	66
E	49	69	77	74	41	83	70	76	70	77	52	66	46	44
	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67			
A	67	60	68	60	79	77	57	61	85	68	70			
E	73	63	42	71	80	67	66	64	76	63	77			

As can be seen in Table 2, Pearson's r-test results suggest that no significant correlation was found between students' achievement in English language learning (A) and their empathy levels (E).

Table 2. Pearson's r-test results

		ELL Grades	ET Scores
A	Pearson Correlation	1	0,171
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,167
	n	67	67
E	Pearson Correlation	0,171	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,167	
	n	67	67

4. Conclusion

Empathy is not an easy feeling that can be nurtured through simple classroom tasks because it requires that one places herself in others' shoes. This study showed a large number of differences among the empathy levels of the students and their achievement in foreign language learning and no correlation was found between the two. However, this study has severe limitations in terms of its scope. A larger group of participants at different age and proficiency levels should be included in future studies to attain more specific results that are easier to generalize. Future studies should also focus on teachers' own empathy levels in relation to their effect on students' achievement in foreign language learning. Similarly, it seems crucial for researchers to analyze the role of empathy in relation to many other variables such as sex, income, and parental education among many others.

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